Social Transformation in Rural Canada: Community, Cultures, and Collective Action

edited by John R. Parkins and Maureen G. Reed
Vancouver: UBC Press 2013
ISBN: 978-0-7748-2381-4
Hardcover, $99.95, 414 pp.

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This book is a collection of eighteen articles whose authors studied different aspects of social transformation taking place in Canada's rural communities. Rural Canada faces demographic challenges resulting not only from fertility decline but also from youth out-migration. Together, these two phenomena are resulting in more rapid aging of the rural than of the urban population. As a consequence, changes in social and cultural relationships are shaping a new pattern of rural life in Canada. The articles are written by 19 scholars from a variety of fields, including economics, sociology, history, geography, environmental science, political science, anthropology, and communications. Some authors are also themselves community leaders and builders.

In their introductory chapter, the editors take a broad view of *social transformation*, describing it as a set of events and processes of social change that defines it as a *political project* connected to power, privilege, and challenge and is therefore more complex than an *economic transition* or a *demographic shift*. They are also aware of several definitions of "rural" in the literature, but for this collection, all regions and territories of Canada outside major urban areas are considered rural. Perhaps this refers to all three gradations of rural and small towns (RST) used by Statistics Canada (2009), i.e., weak, moderate and strong Metropolis Influence Zone (MIZ). I would have liked it better if they were more explicit in this regard.

The eighteen chapters, which explore and present new insights into community, culture, and collective action taken by rural communities, are grouped into seven thematic parts, starting with a historical context beginning in 1851. Then, about 90 percent of Canadians lived in rural Canada; the 2011 census found only 18.9 percent live there today (Statistics Canada 2012). However, Sandwell reports that the number of farm households actually grew during the 100-year period ending in 1971, with a decline recorded for the first time only in 1976.[1] He also notes that in the early decades of the twentieth century, rural farmers were able to lobby for political support for rural ways of living, and farm subsidies to protect their interests. In my opinion, their population strength provided them the political strength to achieve this goal, despite faster urbanization of the population.

In the modern era, globalization and widespread use of technology have provided greater exposure for rural areas. Southcott considers, for example, the increasing influence of Aboriginal peoples over the past 30 years in the political, cultural, social, and economic affairs of Canada's Territorial North as a result of greater exposure provided by globalization. Rural-urban inequalities are now viewed as a human rights issue, according to Southcott. Another impact of globalization is the greater movement of people around the world. While international migrants continue to settle largely in urban areas, the greater exposure rural areas are getting in host

1. It should be noted, on the other hand, that *rural population* counts actually declined for the first time in the census year 1956, and after that declines occurred in 1966, 1971, 1996, and 2001 (http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo62a-eng.htm). Percentage composition of rural population has been on decline since 1851, and after the 1924 census, rural population comprised less than urban population.

countries' immigration programs that aim to address labour force decline as a consequence of population aging is resulting in increased settlement of immigrants there. Yoshida and Ramos found that immigrants who settle in RST, come mostly under the business category and are more likely to be European, non-visible minorities, Judeo-Christians, and women. Further, those who bear children have larger families. Overall, immigrants fare better in terms of employment than those who settle in larger cities and towns. However, self-selection may be an issue, which these authors do not discuss in their analysis.

The second part of the book groups six chapters under the title "Structure and Discourse," focusing on rural-urban interdependence, impacts of labour migration, globalization of production, and politics. Reimer's article points towards the economic, institutional, environmental, and identity interdependence of rural and urban regions. While urban regions depend on rural regions for farm products and other natural resources, rural regions depend on their urban counterparts for manufactured goods. Also, environmental externalities generated in one region have their impact on the other. Government policies must account for these impacts to maintain a balance. Finally, regional identities are important because they draw rural and urban regions together around political or cultural objectives. While some researchers have argued that rural and urban lifestyles will become indistinguishable in the current information age, Reimer argues that regional identity still matters as individuals form their attachment to place, which in turn forms their perceptions, preferences and choices.

Evidence of this is also found by MacDonald and her colleagues, who analyze the social and cultural impacts of mobilities on three rural communities in Newfoundland and Labrador that were impacted by the 1992 moratorium on the ground fishery. These communities had relied on the ground fishery for centuries, and its loss represented an equally great loss of economic opportunities for the young, who then sought opportunities elsewhere in the country, as far away as Alberta. However, in this chapter and in their previous work, the authors have also reported return migration for both economic and non-economic reasons, such as family ties, health reasons, sense of belonging to place of origin, and the high cost of living in the places they had moved to. Short-term mobility (temporary migration) has also increased in these communities, not only among seasonal workers (such as fishers) who migrate to neighbouring communities and provinces on a temporary basis, but also among those who work in remote mining and oil drilling locations, as well as those who commute long distances on a rotation basis. These new mobility patterns have contributed to both the stability and transformation of communities in terms of new service infrastructure and better employment and income opportunities.

While Southcott's article focuses on the impact of globalization on rural communities, Leach discusses how rural Canada is contributing to globalization, using the auto industry in southern Ontario as an example. More women are now joining the auto industry than before; they are also more active in unions and women's organizations. Although the male-dominated industry continues to be hostile towards women, and volatility in the auto sector can undermine family life, Leach hopes that women's increasing participation in the workplace and in women's organizations will improve the situation over time. However, she also feels that government cuts to women's programs and their organizations can have detrimental effects.

One impact of globalization has been greater involvement of the private sector. Hanson describes how the transformation of land management from government to the private sector is affecting rural culture and the conservation of land and water in Alberta, and concludes that conservation has become more commercial. Caine discusses socio-political practices of land management in the Canadian North, and how a transfer of management from government to local communities is leading to cooperation among communities and the development of innovative resource management practices.

Although researchers have studied the social and economic transformation of rural communities resulting from an aging population, research is still lacking on its impact on the youth left behind, an impact that is uneven in terms of population because of the low out-migration of aboriginal youth. Ryser and her colleagues raise the necessity of such research by providing examples from northern British Columbia, stressing the importance of investment in human capital for youth.

Two important determinants of the speed of social transformation are "Culture and Identity," which is the title of the third part of this book, comprising five chapters. On the one hand, adherence to culture and identity can slow down the social transformation of a society. This is demonstrated by Bullock, who interprets the experiences and insights of individuals living in an Ontario forestry town (Northeast Superior Region of Ontario),

and by Bhattacharyya and his colleagues, who discuss how relationships between people and place are important for a community's strength—and also to processes of social transformation, using as an example the Nemiah Valley of British Columbia, a small First Nations community. On the other hand, culture and identity are also viewed as catalysts for change, engines of social transformation, and a source of strength. In this regard, emerging identities as a result of demographically and rapidly changing world environment were studied, in Quebec agriculture by Bryant and in British Columbia's Port Hardy by Young. Davis and Reed also studied emerging identities in relation to regional responses to the pine beetle infestation in BC's interior forests, as starting points for social transformation.

Declining rural populations in modern times also are resulting in a proportionate decline in their political representation. However, the last four chapters in the book emphasize that rural dwellers still play an important role in politics and are not just passively adopting changing economic and social conditions around them. In this set of chapters, contributors focus on the strategies of political mobilization and economic actions that emerge from rural areas. Examples include action against the abandonment of Canadian National Railway's branch line that was a cause of change in grain-handling technology, as discussed by Barney; a campaign to protect the Tobeatic Wilderness Area of Nova Scotia, as discussed by Stoddart; the women's group movement in small towns and rural communities of Newfoundland and Labrador that led interfaith groups and a strong rural labour movement to pressure provincial politicians to address rural poverty in the 2000s, as discussed by Hudson; and, finally, the significant concentration of artists and cultural workers in other artistic sectors located in small and rural municipalities across the country, offering opportunities for economic and social revitalization of rural places, as discussed by Nelson and his colleagues.[2]

The analyses and thought-provoking case studies included in this volume provide an excellent interdisciplinary perspective on the experiences of our rural communities in a world of changing economic, social, and cultural environments. However, the book lacks a consideration of whether the conclusion that rural communities are coping well in maintaining their identity and influence will be sustainable in the future, given the expected changes in the ethnic composition of their population due to immigration. My calculations, based on the 2011 population census and the National Household Survey, reveal that there are about 316,471 immigrants living in RST, and among them, the number who arrived during 2001–2011 period was 73 per cent more than those who arrived in the preceding ten-year period (Bollman 2013; Statistics Canada 2012). Due to the policies and programs adopted at federal, provincial, municipal, and community levels, this number is expected to grow in the near future, which can have its own effect on social and cultural values in our current rural societies—especially since more immigrants now come from non-traditional source regions of the world, such as Asia and Africa. Researchers who study social transformation of rural populations should also pay attention to the impact of increased immigration. Finally, I understand that given the book's focus on different aspects of social transformation, a comparative analysis of the experiences of rural communities may not have been possible in the present collection. A future collection could, however, provide a comparative analysis of different aspects of social transformation, since political environments and ways of living vary in different regions of Canada.

References

Bollman, R. 2013. Immigrants: Where are They Living Now? (http://p2pcanada.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2014/01/FactSheet-Immigrants-Where-are-They-Living-Now.pdf).

Statistics Canada. 2012. Census in Brief: Canada's Rural Population since 1851 Population and Dwelling Counts, 2011 Census (Cat # 98-310-X2011003).

2. The First Nations are also using the court system to claim their rights. One very recent example is their victory in a court battle that granted the title to a large area of the south-central part of British Columbia to the Tsilhqot'in Nation (http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/06/26/supreme_court_grants_land_title_to_bc_first_nation_in_landmark_case.html).